THE FUTURE OF UN PEACE OPERATIONS IN A CHANGING CONFLICT ENVIRONMENT

By Adam Day

Introduction

Conflict dynamics over the past 20 years have generated a range of challenges to UN peace operations that have required significant evolution from the traditional missions of 70 years ago. Originally designed to support inter-state ceasefires and peace agreements, modern peace operations have shifted over time increasingly to address intra-state conflicts, failed/fragile states, and settings involving asymmetric use of force, including from violent extremist groups. The rise of multi-dimensional peace operations in the 1990s reflected this shift, as the UN gradually expanded its roles into state-building, stabilization, protection of civilians, human rights monitoring, institutional capacity building, and robust use of force.

Today's conflict trends may presage the need for another evolution in peace operations in the coming 5-10 years if the UN is to be relevant and effective in its international peace and security roles. In fact, there are already signs that the configuration, mandates, and support provided to peace operations today may be poorly suited to managing the violent conflicts that are prevalent in many parts of the world. Specifically, the growth in importance of non-state actors – including transnational illicit networks, globally-connected violent extremist groups, and private actors wielding new technologies – poses a set of challenges the UN has thus far proven ill-equipped to address. Shifting geopolitical and regional dynamics too have meant the UN has at times been sidelined or otherwise unable to influence violent conflicts that are sustained by proxies and regional interests. Emerging trends – most notably the influence of new technologies, the growing impact of climate change on security, and rapid urbanization – are already contributing to changing risk profiles around the world. The entire UN system will need to adapt to these trends, with major implications for how UN peace operations are designed and implemented.

This paper explores how UN peace operations could be adapted to meet the peace and security challenges of the coming 10 years. The first part outlines current trends in violent conflict, focusing on the rise in importance of non-state actors, the growth of global illicit networks, the role of violent extremism, and regional involvement in internal wars. The second part extends these trends into the future, offering three inter-related scenarios for the coming 10 years and indicating the specific challenges that UN peace operations may face. The third part offers concrete recommendations for the UN Secretariat and Member States to adapt peace operations to address the most likely scenarios.

I. A changing conflict landscape

From the early 1990s to the early 2000s, the world witnessed a steady and sustained decline in civil wars and an overall reduction in casualties caused by war.[1] However, this trend reversed between 2005 and 2015, as the number of major civil wars[2] rose from four to eleven, the highest since 1992.[3] Minor civil wars also rose during the same period, growing to numbers not seen since the early

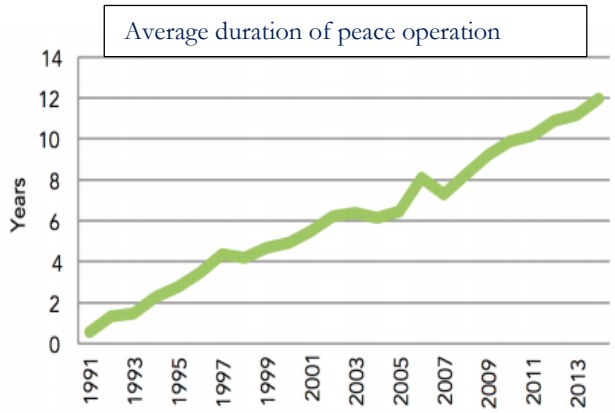
[1] Sebastian Einsiedel et al, Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict, United Nations University, 2017.

[2] Major civil war is defined as at least 1,000 battle related deaths and at least one state actor.

[3] UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 4-2016

1990s. This growth in intrastate conflict generated a dramatic increase in the human cost of war: from 2011 to 2015, there was a six-fold increase in battle related deaths, a rate that has slowed slightly in the past three years but which remains far higher than the average over the past two decades.[4] The 2014-15 period was the deadliest in terms of battle field deaths since the end of the Cold War, with a likely human cost far broader in terms of indirect deaths and suffering.

There is no single cause of this increase in rates of civil war, though scholarly studies have pointed to weak state institutions, economic/social exclusion, and sudden changes in political leadership as factors driving instability.[5] Moreover, civil wars tend to create vicious circles of conflict, worsening the same factors that contributed to violence in the first place. This feeds a very high relapse rate in civil wars: roughly 60 percent of conflicts from the early 2000s have relapsed within five years.[6] Another reason for this high relapse rate may be the lack of definitive victories in the wars of the past 20 years; versus the 1980s, when the preponderance of wars ended in military victories, wars from the 1990s to present have overwhelmingly ended in some form of peace settlement.[7] While these settlements tend to reduce casualties during and immediately after war, they may not decisively settle a new order after conflict, possibly allowing for a resurgence of new conflicts soon after.



This points to one of the most important trends in today's conflicts: they are becoming more intractable, harder to resolve with traditional tools of statecraft and mediation. One indicator of this is the average age of UN peacekeeping missions, which has steadily increased since the early 1990s.

Three interrelated factors are driving the growing intractability of today's conflicts: the rise of transnational illicit networks, increasing internationalization of civil wars, and the role of violent extremist groups in many of the most dangerous wars today. I briefly consider each in turn.

Transnational organized crime

The growth of modern transnational organized crime has its roots in the Cold War and the decision by superpowers to use proxy forces in so-called Third World civil wars. As external state support dried up following the Cold War, these armed nonstate groups built shadow economies, taking advantage of spreading global networks to move goods, money, and people across borders. Today, armed groups and a range of other non-state actors have built enormous networks that significantly alter the political economies of conflict settings, lowering incentives for armed groups to participate in peace processes that might result in the curtailment of their means of survival. Exploitation of natural resources has fueled and prolonged wars in places like Angola, Liberia, the DRC, CAR, Afghanistan and Colombia, and is now connected to ongoing conflicts in Syria, Libya and the Sahel.

---

[4] Prio report https://reliefweb.int/report/world/trends-armed-conflict-1946-2018

[5] World Development Report 2011, Einsiedel, et al.

[6] Scott Gates, Håvard Mokleiv Nygård and Esther Trappeniers, "Conflict Recurrence," Conflict Trends, vol. 2 (Oslo: PRIO, February 2016).

[7] Human Security Report Project, Human Security Report 2009/2010: The Causes of Peace and the Shrinking Costs of War, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Andrew Mack, "Even Failed Peace Agreements Save Lives," Political Violence at a Glance (10 August 2012). http:// politicalviolenceataglance.org/?s=mack.

In many of these settings, rebel factions are able to gain direct access to resources, which provide them with sufficient means to fragment into far more independent groups than ever before. Today, the average number of rebel groups fighting in civil wars is well over 14, roughly double the average 70 years ago. Proliferation of armed groups not only creates new risks to civilians, but also immense challenges for those seeking peace agreements amongst an ever-growing cast of conflict parties.[8]

The growth of illicit markets has also made organized violence more accessible to non-state actors. Able to use social media for communication/recruitment and finding access to weapons and black market finance streams easier than ever, groups wishing to challenge state authority and demonstrate force have become more common and dangerous. And by relying on external markets for resources, these groups have little incentive to build constructive relationships with local communities, making them more likely to target civilians.[9]

Organized crime not only directly drives violent conflict, but it also has a detrimental effect on governance, undermining state authority and weakening the capacity of basic governing institutions. In places like Afghanistan and DRC, for example, the involvement of armed groups in lucrative illicit economies has meant they enjoy significant legitimacy amongst the local population, including by providing basic security and services to many communities. This does not mean states are excluded from illicit economies; in places like Ghaddafi's Libya and parts of the Sahel today, for example, governments actively participate in illicit trafficking, fueling resentment amongst populations that are negatively affected by rent-seeking and exploitation.[10]

International/regional involvement in internal wars

The intractability of today's civil wars is also driven by a trend of increasing external involvement by regional and international actors. In 1991, fewer than 5 percent of civil wars involved military involvement by external actors; by 2015, that number had grown to 40 percent.[11] Some of the most prominent civil wars today are dominated by external actors, from the involvement of Russian, US, and Iranian forces in the war in Syria, to the role of Ugandan, Rwandan and other neighboring forces in the DRC's many conflicts. While foreign powers continue to use proxy forces within countries, their willingness to deploy their own troops is worrying, not only because of the risk of great power confrontation if conflicts spread and escalate, but also due to the increased numbers of civilian casualties that result from such involvement.[12]

Foreign and proxy forces present complex challenges to peace operations, which are typically deployed to manage conflicts within national boundaries. In Somalia, for example, African Union peacekeepers have struggled to address the multiple risks posed by foreign-backed militias, which tend to respond to chains of command stretching well beyond Somalia's borders. Similar cross-border dynamics are present in eastern DRC, Mali, and South Sudan, where the UN has deployed large peace operations.

Jihadist networks

[8] Michael Ross, "Oil, Drugs, and Diamonds: The Varying Roles of Natural Resources in Civil War," in The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance, ed. Karen Ballentine and Jake Sherman, (Boulder, Lynner Rienner, 2003), 47 – 73.

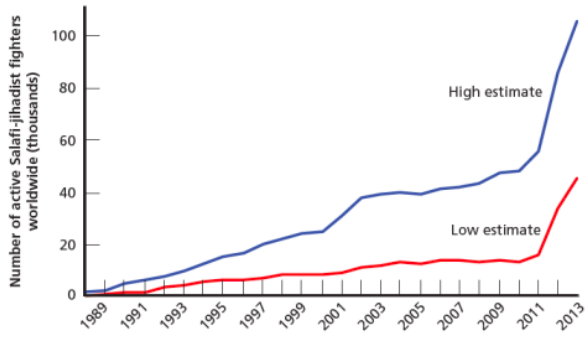
[9] Jeremy Weinstein, Inside Rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). See also Kyle Beardsley, Kristian Gleditsch and Nigel Lo, "Roving and Stationary Bandits in African Armed Conflicts," Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association (San Francisco, 2013).

[10] See, James Cockayne, Hidden Power: The Strategic Logic of Organised Crime (Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2016).

[11] UCPD/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 4-2016

[12] UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset v.5-2014.

While violent extremism can take many forms, a significant trend over the past ten years has been the growing influence of jihadist groups in many of today's conflict settings. Globally, the past decade has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of fighters identifying as jihadist, accompanied by a drastic increase in the number of fatalities caused by ISIS, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, and their affiliate groups. The reach of these groups has also grown significantly, particularly into conflict areas where state authority has been weakened through decades of poor governance and political exclusion.



The role of jihadist groups in many of today's conflicts not only creates new protection challenges for peacekeepers, but also poses major impediments to peace processes. Often pursuing maximalist demands and unwilling to adhere to basic human rights commitments that tend to be part of peace agreements, jihadist groups are difficult to incorporate into UN-led peace processes. Some groups are isolated by sanctions regimes and/or unwilling to engage with UN missions, at times targeting the UN – the significant rise in UN casualties in settings like Mali speaks to the growing risks of asymmetric use of force in conflict.

Emerging trends – technology, climate, demography

Three emerging trends are increasingly impacting the conflict landscape: new technologies, climate change, and demographic shifts. The phrase "new technology" is actually a misnomer, given the prevalence of artificial intelligence-driven processes across the globe today. In many respects, technology has enabled a much wider range of actors to become influential players in violent conflict, whether it is the use of social media platforms for recruitment into armed groups, dark web transfers of resources to violent actors, or the weaponization of emerging technologies. As Eleonore Pauwels has described, it is the convergence of AI with other technologies that may pose the most dangerous threats globally, whether it is through weaponized biotechnology, large-scale cyber-attacks on infrastructure, or manipulation of societies through sophisticated algorithms.[13] Already, the potential for escalation has been demonstrated by reports of cyber-security tensions between the US and both Russia and China. Future violent conflicts, especially those involving international interference by powerful states, may well take on a technological character.

While not necessarily a direct causal driver, climate change is increasingly recognized as a threat multiplier to violent conflict, capable of increasing a range of risks in fragile settings.[14] Some of the ways climate change is already affecting conflict risks include: (1) changing rainfall patterns and more extreme weather destroying livelihoods and driving some towards illicit networks and/or armed groups; and (2) destruction of arable land by flooding and extreme weather causing large-scale displacement, often into areas already experiencing tensions over resources and/or overcrowding. These trends are set to increase at far faster rates than the recent past, given the rapidly increasing global temperatures. Especially in the Sahel—where a combination of temperature rises and heavy dependency on subsistence agriculture—the evidence of climate-driven insecurity is becoming

[13] Eleonore Pauwels, "The New Geopolitics of Converging Risks: The UN and Prevention in the Era of AI," United Nations University, 2019.
[14] Adam Day and Jessica Caus, "Conflict Prevention in an Era of Climate Change," United Nations University, 2020.

inescapable; however, as sea-level rises encroach on low-lying countries in South Asia in particular, large-scale population displacements will play an important role in stability in the coming 10 years.[15]

In most of the world's most fragile settings, demographic growth is happening faster than the global average, such as conflict affected areas of northern Nigeria and Burkina Faso, but it is straining national resources in a wide swathe of middle-income countries as well. Importantly, this growth is accompanied by large-scale urbanization as younger populations abandon rural agrarian lifestyles for the opportunities of cities. For the first time in history, more people live within urban settlements than outside of them, meaning city fragility will play a far more direct role in conflict risks than ever before.[16] Already, some peace operations have found themselves drawn into urban conflicts, which pose unique challenges to the use of force in particular.[17]

A shift to multipolarity

Since the early 2000s, great power politics has been characterized by increasing levels of rupture, tension, and disintegrating cooperation within traditional multilateral structures. Evidence of this can be found in the near paralysis of the Security Council in the face of conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, and the South China Sea, the withdrawal of the US from major multilateral processes like the Iran nuclear deal, and deepening economic rifts between the US and China that undermine the WTO. One of the longstanding functions of multilateral institutions—in particular the Security Council—has been to act as a clearing house for great power tensions, allowing for tensions to be reduced before leading to direct confrontation between the most militarily dominant states in the world. As states reduce their emphasis on multilateral institutions, the risk of escalation between major powers may increase, as evidenced by current US-China tensions.

Some scholars have suggested that a shift away from unipolar or bipolar forms of global governance may herald a "world in disarray" as a much larger number of states jostle for power at the highest levels.[18] It is not clear whether a multipolar world will necessarily lead to greater instability than the previous eras, but the shift does indicate that the UN structures may be poorly suited for the coming period unless significant changes are put in place. The Security Council, for example, does not reflect the economic or military strength of a range of emerging actors, which may render it less relevant to future conflict prevention tasks. While not the principle focus of this paper, geopolitical dynamics will continue to strongly influence conflict trends, in particular the willingness of powerful states to confront competitors on the battlefield.

COVID-19—the uncertainty factor

The medium to long-term impacts of COVID-19 are not clear, but some trends are already emerging that may impact conflict risks in the next 5-10 years. Most importantly, the pandemic is generating a severe economic downturn globally, which may be most keenly felt in fragile states that have few financial or social safeguards. In highly unequal societies, financial losses are almost certain to be passed along to poorer sectors, resulting in greater inequalities and potentially greater risks for social unrest.[19] Generally, economic downturns tend to add to the risks of popular uprisings and the

[15] See, e.g., Adam Day, "Bangladesh Case Study," in Adam Day and Jessica Caus, "Conflict Prevention in an Era of Climate Change," United Nations University, 2020.
[16] See John de Boer, Robert Muggah, Ronak Patel, "Conceptualizing City Fragility," United Nations University, 2017.
[17] See, e.g. the UN missions in Haiti and CAR.
[18] Richard Haas, A World In Disarray.
[19] UN/World Bank Pathways for Peace.

kinds of social unrest that often trigger violent conflicts.[20] While the impact of the pandemic is still unfolding, a reasonable assumption could be that it will contribute to higher risks of instability in the coming years, and possibly a greater demand for peacekeeping.[21]

II. Three scenarios for 2030

Based on the conflict trends identified in the previous section and the overview scenarios paper by Paul Williams, this part explores three potential scenarios over the coming 5-10 years. These scenarios are not mutually exclusive and attempt to capture a range of possible trajectories for the evolution of violent conflict and its implications for the UN. Importantly, while the scenarios mention specific countries, these are meant as examples of the types of settings where conflict might arise, not any kind of direct prediction about conflict in that country.

Scenario one: intractability means more of the same

One of the most important insights from the above analysis is that violent conflict is becoming more intractable and more likely to re-occur in settings that have recently undergone war. If this trend continues, the most likely scenario is that we continue to witness wars in settings that are now in conflict and/or have recently emerged from war. Indeed, it is quite possible that 2030 is very similar to 2020 in terms of the types and locations of violent conflicts, though perhaps with even fewer prospects for resolution or entry points for political engagement. Such a scenario might look like this:

> *2030 witnessed continuing severe instability in the Sahel region, with violent extremists continuing to affect large swathes of Mali, the Lake Chad Basin, and parts of Niger and Burkina Faso. Poor governance capacities in these states contributed to frequent civil unrest and direct challenges to the state, including attempted coups in several of the Sahelian countries in the past five years and the continued growth of jihadist networks that pursue separatist agendas. The Great Lakes region also remains volatile, with dozens of armed groups destabilizing parts of eastern DRC, and continuing unrest in Burundi. In East Africa, the Somali Government has been unable to wrest large parts of its territory from armed groups, as a combination of Shabaab and proxy fighters hold sway in much of the center of the country. Civil unrest in Ethiopia has simmered for the past decade, sometimes spiking into larger scale ethnically-driven violence. In the Middle East, while direct military confrontations in Syria and Yemen have largely dwindled, opposition forces remain active and frequently clash with state security services, while millions of civilians remain displaced from their homes. Afghanistan remains one of the most unstable countries in the world, as repeated efforts to broker deals with the Taliban have yet to achieve a lasting peace process amidst reciprocal accusations by the US and Russia of interference in domestic Afghan affairs.*
>
> *The result is that UN peace operations remain entrenched in the same settings in which they were deployed a decade before. Following several abortive peace processes in Mali, MINUSMA has maintained its presence and protection focus, facing daily threats to its peacekeepers from armed groups in the central part of the country. While the Security Council had hoped to end the UN's peacekeeping presence in DRC by 2024, the proliferation of armed groups and volatile political situation in the country meant that MONUSCO has maintained a small rapid reaction peacekeeping force based in Goma, while shifting much of the stabilization work to UN agencies*

[20] For a literature review on the impacts of poor financial performance on conflict risks, see Adam Day, Dirk Druet, Luise Quaritsch, "When Dictators Fall:

[21] Adam Day, "Why Covid-19 offers a chance to transform UN peacekeeping," The Conversation, https://theconversation.com/why-covid-19-offers-a-chance-to-transform-un-peacekeeping-139416.

rather than the mission. The peace operations in South Sudan, CAR, Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq have all continued in much the same form as in 2020, reflecting stagnant peace processes, persistent threats from armed groups, and lack of meaningful progress towards more effective governance institutions.

In this scenario, some of the most important challenges will be around reviving stagnant or backsliding peace processes, identifying viable exit strategies for UN peace operations, and addressing endemic protection risks in settings where the conflict actors continue to show little interest in abating violence. Another challenge could be the waning levels of enthusiasm by Council member and TCCs in continuing to support peace operations that may have been deployed for upwards of 20 years without significant progress on the political front.

Scenario two: many small fires, no water

The combination of climate-driven socio-economic changes, demographic shifts, and the global impacts of COVID-19 could point to a long, gradual economic decline for some of the world's most fragile regions. This could result in deepening political and economic exclusion, higher levels of social unrest, and weakening governance capacities over the next 5-10 years. The emergence of many localized conflicts, driven by economic shocks and dissatisfaction with ruling elites, could create a scenario of many small fires with few resources to put them out:

In 2030, the Sahel/Central African region was beset with dozens of mini-insurgencies and destabilizing events, many of which could be traced back to the sustained economic downturn following the 2020 pandemic. A long-simmering uprising in Cameroon briefly exploded into open conflict, triggering a large-scale population displacement into neighboring Nigeria. This in turn fed local conflicts northern Nigeria, largely between farmers and herders but also spreading into direct confrontations between militias and state forces. Facing a challenge to his 40-year rule of Chad, Idriss Deby cracked down on dissident forces, after which large public protests took place in Ndjamena and threatened to destabilize the country. In Ethiopia, popular unrest reached new heights as the government failed to meet protestors' demands, resulting in ethnically-driven killings amongst the Oromo community, an attempted rebellion against the ruling party, and rapid escalation into broader violence.

In South Asia, climate-driven displacement triggered a rapid escalation between India and Bangladesh, amidst reports that over one million Bangladeshis had fled to India's Assam region following massive flooding and extreme weather. India's right-wing government deployed several battalions to the Bangladeshi border, killing hundreds of "climate refugees" as they attempted to cross illegally.

The global economic downturn offered new opportunities to transnational criminal networks which not only flourished in sub-Saharan Africa, but also built new inroads based out of Latin America. Over the past ten years, these networks have undermined state authority and increasingly controlled the political economies of Haiti, Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, Mexico, and Guatemala. In some instances, criminal cartels directly challenged state authority and took control of large swathes of territory, amidst unheeded calls for international intervention.

This scenario foresees a growth in relatively low-level conflicts driven by poor socio-economic trends and growing inequalities between rich and poor. For UN peace operations, it means that many of the most dangerous settings around the world will fall below the Security Council's radar,

or in places where it is unlikely for the Council to act together. The result may be that Resident Coordinators and/or small UN presences become the frontline in conflict management in a greater range of settings even than today, requiring innovative configurations and mandates by the UN.

Scenario three: civil wars escalate beyond their borders

The above trend analysis points to an increasing willingness of large powers to directly involve themselves in civil wars, raising the likelihood of escalation into direct conflict between them. The simultaneous retreat from multilateral institutions by many of the world's great powers could mean that modalities for de-escalation are more elusive. Over the coming 10 years, such a scenario might look something like this:

> *2030 witnessed a further escalation of tensions between the US and Iran, as the combination of the failed nuclear deal and rapid growth of Tehran-affiliated militias in Iraq, Syria and Yemen proved "too much for Washington to bear." A hawk-driven US administration took active steps in the Persian Gulf to punish Iran, striking an alleged nuclear fission site outside of Tehran. Israel, now enjoying normalized relations with most Gulf states, followed suit, striking dozens of sites across Iran. Instability across the Middle East led Russia and the US to move more actively into Iraq and Syria, deploying combat troops that came into direct contact with each other.*
>
> *US-Russia tensions also grew over Afghanistan, amidst accusations by Washington that Moscow was openly supporting anti-US elements in the country, including the clandestine deployment of Russian troops on Afghan soil. In response, the US deployed more active troops into Afghanistan, causing a collapse of a fragile peace deal with the Taliban and renewed fighting.*
>
> *The collapse of the Venezuelan regime—triggered by dropping oil prices—caused a rush by the US and China to shore up rival political coalitions and secure influence in the resource-rich country. Reports that China had deployed troops to support its allies there led the US to threaten intervention. Calls for a UN peace operation in Venezuela were thwarted by a polarized Security Council.*
>
> *After years of continued construction on the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, China began actively preventing merchant vessels from passing within through the main trading passage between Brunei and Vietman, cutting off one of the most important routes in the world. This erupted into direct confrontation between a US/France/UK coalition and China, bringing the countries to the brink of war.*
>
> *Geopolitical tensions result in near total paralysis within the Security Council, which could not muster the necessary unity to take action beyond renewal of existing peace operations. Frustrated by the lack of traction in the UN, the US, Russia and China increasingly turn to bilateral actions to address their national interests, including reciprocal cyber-attacks, deployment of national forces and severe economic measures.*

In this scenario, the most important challenge to the international peace and security will fall largely outside of UN peace operations. Indeed, settings where the UN is deployed are more akin to microcosms of larger battles between international power brokers, but by 2030 these localized conflicts will have escalated into more direct confrontation. How can the UN engage in settings where major powers—including those on the Security Council—are actively involved? In many cases, the UN will need to rely even more heavily than today on partnerships with regional/international actors willing to intervene in settings where the Council is unable to act.

III. Recommendations for future peace operations

The above scenarios are not mutually exclusive; some form of all three is likely to take place over the coming 10 years. Of course, more drastic changes to the conflict landscape could be precipitated by larger geopolitical acts, such as the use of weapons of mass destruction, large-scale bioweapons, or new technologies capable of harming large populations. The following recommendations do not account for such dramatic shifts, but rather attempt to grapple with the most likely trajectories of conflict described above.

1. **Prepare for a long haul.** The average lifespan of peace operations has increased steadily over the past 30 years and today we see missions that have been deployed for decades with little prospect of securing a clear, sustainable peace. This is in part because the kinds of civil wars into which UN operations are deployed are driven by weak state governance capacities, endemic corruption, political exclusion, and decades of structural violence. As the World Bank has pointed out, the kinds of social and political transformation required to transition from such settings into stable liberal democracies is measured in multiple decades, not peacekeeping mandate periods. If the UN is to continue mandating peace operations in such settings, it should prepare for a long horizon, or revisit its conditions for success.

   Furthermore, despite the intractability of modern conflict, peace operations have nonetheless been tasked with broad social and political transformations that will take decades to achieve under even the most positive circumstances. Peace operations are almost certainly not the right tool to generate such changes, whereas a range of other UN actors (e.g. peacebuilding, development) are likely better suited. Rather than continue to saddle peacekeeping with sprawling mandates covering national reforms, security sector transformation, capacity building, and extension of state authority, the UN may need to consider a much smaller set of tasks for tomorrow's missions. Asking "What can the UN mission achieve over the next three years?" may be a helpful starting question to add some realism to future missions, but it should be paired with the question, "What can the UN family achieve over the next 20 years?"

2. **Develop multi-scalar approaches to missions.** Violent conflicts represent a network of interlinked actors, including highly localized participants in fighting, national actors directing political groups, and regional/international players providing support to one or more parties. UN peace operations tend to represent these levels discretely: civil affairs is mandated to do local conflict resolution, the political leadership of the mission engages with national actors towards a peace process, and often a separate special envoy is tasked with a regional mandate. While this helpfully parses out roles and responsibilities, it tends to result in fractured approaches and multiple discrete strategies, ignoring the interlinked nature of these different levels. Instead, peace operations should be designed to analyze and respond to the ways in which local, national, and regional actors form an interdependent network. This could be partially achieved via a fairly simple eradication of the distinction between civil and political affairs officer, or by improved mandating by the Security Council.

   Moreover, as the above trends and predictions indicate, some of the settings that will present the most serious risks to regional stability are strongly influenced by transnational criminal networks and/or global jihadi groups. The current configurations of UN peace operations are poorly suited to these tasks, particularly those requiring analysis and engagement with the political economy of conflict, and also addressing the risks of asymmetric security threats. Similarly, urbanization trends are likely to see tomorrow's conflicts played out on city streets rather than jungles or deserts, meaning that the deployment of large battalions of soldiers for protection work may be ineffective. In settings with high levels of urban violence, police-led

missions might be better suited to the task; indeed, in countries where illicit trafficking feeds conflict actors, some form of direct support to interdiction and anti-corruption efforts could be a useful aspect of a peace operations' mandate.[22] The first step is to see peace operations as a flexible configuration of assets that do not need to fall neatly into a PKO or an SPM.

3. **Re-examine the role of robust use of force.** There are settings in which the deployment of UN soldiers plays an unambiguously positive role in conflict management. Where the UN is providing a security guarantee for a widely accepted peace agreement, for example, troops have sometimes demonstrated a real capacity to hold parties to account, help reduce the effects of spoilers, and reduce risks to civilians. However, in longstanding civil wars where the parties have not committed to a viable peace process—or indeed during the long periods where there was no peace agreement in place with most parties—the contribution of troops with a robust use of force mandate is far less certain, while the costs are extremely high in both financial and human terms. In some cases, there may be significant value in deploying robust troops to protect civilians and prevent atrocities, but this goal should be clearly articulated and not confused with support to a peace process, and expectations should be kept realistic. If the future of peace operations is to include deployment into ongoing civil wars, situations of asymmetric violence, and chaotic admixtures of proxy fighters, militias, and foreign forces, the utility of UN peacekeeping soldiers should be seriously reviewed rather than presumed as necessary.

4. **Build innovative partnerships beyond the UN.** The willingness of foreign actors to meddle directly in the civil wars of strategically important fragile states has meant that the UN is often either sidelined or cornered, unable to influence the trajectory of the conflict while often blamed for the failures of a peace process. In some cases, the UN has usefully partnered with regional organizations to increase the effectiveness of operations on the ground (e.g. the AU troops in Somalia). In others, it has coordinated and supported a range of external forces, with mixed results (e.g. MINUSMA's support to the G5 Sahel). If current trends continue, the UN will be even more sidelined in major conflicts and will need to invest even more heavily in partnerships than today.

   But the concept of partnership should not be restricted to the usual few regional organizations. For example, what kind of partnership will allow a peace operation to effectively address the ways in which climate change is affecting conflict risks? The answer to this could mean a peace operation works with an international financial institution to develop conflict-sensitive disaster response planning. Or in the case of conflicts involving transnational illicit networks, a peace operation might need to be linked to anti-trafficking organizations, or employ cyber-tracking experts.

5. **Build a political economy analytic capacity.** UN peace operations have significantly improved their analytic capacities, including through the establishment of JMACs, various subject matter experts (e.g natural resources) and an emerging peacekeeping intelligence capacity. And while these capacities have at times included a political economy analysis, peace operations remain grounded in a fundamentally political science mentality, aimed at brokering an elite bargain from which peace will emerge. As the above trend analysis demonstrates, tomorrow's conflicts will be largely dictated by socio-economic factors, whether it is loss of livelihood triggered by climate-change, global economic downturns felt

[22] Some models can be found here: https://theconversation.com/why-covid-19-offers-a-chance-to-transform-un-peacekeeping-139416.

most harshly by fragile states, or deepening inequalities resulting from a combination of urbanization, uneven growth, and new technologies in the hands of a few. UN peace operations will only be relevant to the extent they are able to understand and respond to these dynamics. Building bespoke political economy analysis is an important first step; establishing more meaningful engagements with international and national financial institutions is another.

6. **Embrace complexity.** One of the challenges facing peace operations is the complexity of the conflicts around them. If anything, the trends described above point to deepening complexity, as factors like climate change, demographic shifts, and new technologies intersect with more traditional conflict drivers in convoluted ways. There is a tendency within peacekeeping to reduce narratives to fairly simplified terms, in part to communicate an intelligible narrative to the Council and actors on the ground, and also to clarify roles and responsibilities within the UN system. Unfortunately, these narratives tend to place the UN in a more central role than in reality, meaning peacekeeping operations are saddled with responsibilities that far outstrip their ability to generate change. Over time, the UN will need to embrace the interrelated nature of conflicts more than it does today, to see peace operations as a node in a system in which change is driven by countless factors well outside of a traditional mission's purview. Future peace operations may need to include climate change scientists, economists, urban planners, and social media experts, if they are to understand and affect the trajectories of violent conflict.